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ABSTRACT

Traditional assessment in reading and writing does not accurately reflect what we currently know about the reading and writing process. It disempowers teachers, students, and parents; separates assessment, instruction, and learning; and employs externally defined criteria for cross assessment purposes. Efforts to develop useful alternative procedures for the reading and writing classroom have proliferated during the past several years. However, few movements have caught the attention of educators as quickly as the move towards the use of portfolios as alternative assessment procedures for reading and writing. Implications of portfolios as assessment techniques include: serving as a source of information for teachers to make decisions regarding student progress and program evaluation, serving as a source of information for parent, teacher, and student collaboration, serving as a means of reflection for student self-evaluation, and serving as a means of linking instruction to learning. (Contains 15 references.) (Author)

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Portfolio Assessment in Reading and Writing:

Linking Assessment and Instruction to Learning

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Abstract

Traditional assessment in reading and writing does not accurately reflect what we currently know about the reading and writing process. It disempowers teachers, students, and parents; separates assessment, instruction, and learning; and employs externally defined criteria for cross assessment purposes.

Efforts to develop useful alternative procedures for the reading and writing classroom have proliferated during the past several years. However, few movements have caught the attention of educators as quickly as the move towards the use of portfolios as alternative assessment procedures for reading and writing.

Implications of portfolios as assessment techniques include: serving as a source of information for teachers to make decisions regarding student progress and program evaluation, serving as a source of information for parent, teacher, and student collaboration, serving as a means of reflection for student self evaluation, and serving as a means of linking instruction to learning.

Introduction

Traditional assessment in reading and writing does not accurately reflect what we currently know about the reading and writing process (Grace, 1992). It disempowers teachers, students, and parents; separates assessment, instruction, and learning; and employs externally defined criteria for cross assessment purposes. Assessment should be an integral component of the curriculum. It should provide the teacher with a means of evaluating not only the child's progress, but also program goals and objectives as well as the extent to which methods of instruction are helping children accomplish these goals. To link instruction and learning to assessment, a more appropriate technique must be used that empowers teachers with the necessary information for decision making.

Efforts to develop useful alternative procedures for the reading and writing classroom have proliferated during the past several years. However, few movements have caught the attention of educators as quickly as the move towards the use of portfolios as alternative assessment procedures for reading and writing. Portfolios are purposeful collections of students' work and records of progress and

achievement collected over time, used by teachers as a vehicle for reflection, self-assessment and goal setting (Valencia et al, 1990).

Rationale

A rationale for using portfolio assessment in the reading and writing classroom was developed by Valencia, McGinley, and Pearson (1990). They contended that if reading and writing are primary goals of communication in the curriculum, then assessment must reflect these goals. Teachers should use their expertise in developing and using portfolio assessment. They identified the following assessment criteria: Continuity, multidimensional, collaboration, and authenticity. Portfolio assessment helps meet these criteria in the following ways according to Meisels and Steele (1991): Serving as an on-going assessment procedure; providing information for decision making regarding students' progress in integrated areas of the curriculum; providing for collaboration between teachers of students in selecting and evaluating samples of work to be included; and providing the basis for overall evaluation of student performance.

Portfolio assessment puts evaluation back into the hands of the teacher. It provides information enabling the teacher to evaluate student

progress, program objectives and instruction.

The work that children produce on their own initiative is a better indication of their development than the score on a standardized test (Grace, 1992). A child's writing is clear evidence of his/her emerging literacy. From the child's written story, the teacher can determine if the child has acquired the skills of directionality, has produced correct letter formations, has used the correct story format and has written a creative story. She can observe the use of inventive spellings and also observe the child as he "reads" the story. The date and the teachers observations can be recorded on the story and the story filed in the childs' folder for reference. Portfolios contain evidence that document the child's progress.

Description

Portfolios may be as individualized as the teachers who use them (Shaver, Belk, et al., 1993). Many teachers have working portfolios and finished-work portfolios for students. The working portfolios are folders that contain students' work in progress. During this stage the teacher may have frequent conferences with students concerning problems that arise and also work with the student in doing a self-evaluation of the

work in progress. Grace (1993) lists the following types of questions that may be used to inspire students to reexamine the work in progress: Where did you get the idea for this selection? How does this selection compare with other things you've written? What is special about this selection? Why did you choose to include this selection? What was your favorite part? As you reflect on this selection, decide if you would make any changes.

Another kind of portfolio is the finished-work portfolio. This is a collection of the students work that has been selected by students and teachers cooperatively to reflect the students' best, favorite, or most-improved work. In order to be helpful to the teacher, guidelines must be established as to what materials to include and how the materials should be organized. The decision regarding what to include in portfolios should be based on program goals and objectives. It is important for the student to establish ownership of the portfolio by helping select work to be included in the portfolio. In making this decision Cooper (1993) suggests conferencing with the students and helping them evaluate strengths and weaknesses in the work samples through the use of sample questions directed towards the writing.

The teacher may select work to be included that demonstrates progress towards objectives, achievement of students in particular areas, skills mastered, and examples of creativity (Salinger, 1993). Types of materials that may be included are: Checklists to document student's interests in books and stories; lists of favorite stories and books; reading developmental checklists; teacher observation of strengths and weaknesses in reading skills; and audio/visual tapes of demonstrations or projects.

The material in a portfolio may be organized by the different areas in language arts. Materials should by filed in time sequence for easy reference, and all the materials filed should be dated. Self-sticking notes may be attached for comments.

Findings

Calfee and Perfumo (1993) conducted a survey of portfolio practices in selected elementary schools throughout the U.S. A survey form was mailed to respondents asking them to brainstorm and categorize reflections about portfolios. The form was divided into particular categories. A two day conference was held in conjunction with the survey. Additional information concerning the use of portfolios was

collected and analyzed. The results of the survey and conference indicated the following practices in relation to the use of portfolios: Teachers are highly committed and motivated in reference to the movement; there is a wide diversity concerning the format and design of portfolios at all levels; there is an emphasis towards narrative, descriptive reporting as opposed to standards and grades.

Johnston's (1992) research also talks of the teacher's commitment to portfolios. Teachers are regaining control of evaluation from basal texts and testing authorities by turning to portfolio assessment. However, he cautions educators to be aware of threats to this authentic, refreshing method. Some of the cautions pertain to standards, norm-referencing, aggregation, and credibility. Some people imply that these terms have the same meanings for everyone. However, there is little consensus on the part of educators regarding these terms. Many would use these terms to take away from the profound evaluation movement of portfolios.

Wolf (1991) described the research completed by the Teacher Assessment Project (TAP) on new approaches to teacher evaluation. In this research a teacher's portfolio is described as being an assessment

of teacher and student performance over a long period of time. According to the research an advantage of a portfolio is that it reflects the richness and complexities of teaching and learning. By analyzing the content, teachers can look at what they and their students have accomplished. The following disadvantages of using portfolios were also cited: Portfolios are time consuming for teachers; portfolios are difficult to construct and evaluate; also a great deal of space is needed to store them throughout the years.

Hansen (1992) described a Literacy Portfolio Project in Manchester, New Hampshire. Students in this project were from a first grade class, an elementary resource room, a self-contained sixth grade, and junior and senior high English classes. Each student chose a variety of items from in school and out of school to put in his literacy portfolio. The teachers, administrators and teachers from the University of New Hampshire then talked to the students to find out why they chose those particular things. Findings from this project indicated that students were able to evaluate themselves more accurately and the portfolios gave teachers a more comprehensive picture of each child's abilities.

Paris et al. (1992) described the following critical dimensions and

attributes of literacy that should be considered when evaluating reading and writing: Engagement with text through reading; engagement with text through writing; knowledge about literacy; orientation to literacy; ownership of literacy; collaboration; and connectedness of the curriculum. Portfolios reveal a range of skills and understandings and support instructional goals. They are also valuable as vehicles for student and teacher reflection. They illustrate changes and growth over a period of time and provide for continuity in educational levels from one year to the next.

State legislatures have begun to enact laws that mandate the use of direct assessment of student performances as the means of determining how well schools, districts, and state education systems are performing. The movement towards the use of portfolios as an assessment technique is widespread. Though it basically began as a grassroots movement by classroom teachers, other agencies are now drafting proposals for using portfolios as evaluation devices. The state of Vermont, Educational Testing Service, universities, and public school districts have become involved in the movement (Tierney et al., 1991).

Despite the surge of interest in portfolios as alternative assessments, there are concerns from supporters who fear that such assessments are often launched without adequate thought and preparation. This, together with criticisms from those who favor traditional means of assessment, may have a devastating effect on the movement. Publishers of standardized tests creating models of portfolios may be another cause for concern. Worthen (1993) expressed the fear that unless the issues confronting portfolios are thoughtfully addressed and resolved, today's interest and confidence in alternative assessment may well ebb leaving little lasting impact.

Implications

With proper construction, use, and interpretation, portfolios have enormous implications for teachers, students, parents, and administrators by: serving as a source of information for teachers to make decisions regarding student progress and program evaluation; serving as a source of information for parent, teacher, and student collaboration, and serving as a means of reflection and student self-evaluation. Portfolios represent the philosophy that assessment is a vital part of instruction and as such they should provide a guide for learning (Valencia, 1990). They provide

a means of increasing student learning; improving methods of teaching by identifying strengths and weaknesses in instruction; and determining program effectiveness in relation to goals and objectives (Tierney, 1992). Portfolios integrate assessment into the curriculum and, thereby, provide a means of linking assessment to instruction and learning in the reading and writing classrooms.

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